

British Gentleman Personified

Actor David Niven's Dashing Life Ends at 73

By MICHAEL SEILER, *Times Staff Writer*

David Niven, whose clipped accent and thin mustache made him the personification of the British gentleman in more than 90 films spread over nearly half a century, died Friday in his mountain chalet in Chateau D'Oex, Switzerland.

Niven was 73 and had moved to the Swiss Alps three weeks ago from his home in southern France.

"My uncle died peacefully and without pain," said his nephew Michael Wrangdahl. "His last gesture a few minutes before he died had been to give the thumbs-up sign."

The Oscar-winning actor died after a months-long battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a debilitating nerve and muscle disorder commonly called Lou Gehrig's disease.

He had lost some of his power of speech and the use of his left hand,

his wife told newsmen last March.

To generations of English-speaking peoples he was more than a first-rate film actor. Niven authored several books, including two well-received autobiographical memoirs, "The Moon's a Balloon" and "Bring on the Empty Horses," which confirmed Niven's reputation as a raconteur.

More than that, the books attested to the fact that Niven—a man of considerable charm, wit and sophistication—had an extraordinary life, filled with such entertainment industry giants as Darryl F. Zanuck, Errol Flynn and Humphrey Bogart, and political figures such as Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy.

James David Graham Niven was born March 1, 1910, in Kirriemuir, Scotland, the son of an army reserve

Please see NIVEN, Page 26

NIVEN: Dashing Actor Dies at 73

Continued from First Page

lieutenant who was to die five years later during the World War I Gallipoli campaign.

Niven's widowed, financially strapped mother moved to England and young David bounced around from school to school. He was, quite possibly, "a thoroughly poisonous little boy," Niven said later in explaining his expulsion from one school. He finally ended up at Sandhurst, Britain's equivalent of West Point.

Young Niven's military career was relatively brief and undistinguished. He served three years as a lieutenant in a Scottish infantry regiment, two of them on the hot, "sty island of Malta where he did little more than polish his skills in rugby and polo—on horses borrowed from other officers because young Niven had little money of his own.

Niven disliked the army—he had gone to Sandhurst for lack of anything more promising to do—and the future of a junior officer in the peacetime army seemed dim.

The frustrations came to a head when Niven insulted a general and, rather than face court martial, resigned his commission in 1932.

Niven sailed off to Canada to visit friends, then went on to New York City where other friends, capitalizing on the end of Prohibition, hired him as a wholesale liquor salesman. But Niven flopped at that, and was little more successful at his next try—promoting a sort of rodeo-equestrian show in Atlantic City.

The unemployed but always-charming Niven drifted west to California, helped, as always, by a large circle of friends and acquaintances. He saw his first movie studio—Fox—when members of Loretta Young's family sneaked him past the guards under a rug on the floor of her limousine.

He was suitably impressed—"I just gaped and gaped and wondered if I could ever be a part of it," Niven wrote much later in "The Moon's a Balloon." Encouraged by his friends, Niven signed on at Central Casting on Western Avenue.

They listed him, back in 1935, as "English type, No. 2008. Niven, David."

Niven was on his way—slowly.

A chance meeting with old military friends on a British cruiser in Santa Barbara Bay led to a hangover and an introduction to director Frank Lloyd, who later signed him as an extra in the original "Mutiny on the Bounty"—Niven's first film appearance.

Lloyd passed him on to another leading director of the period, Edmund Goulding, who had Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer do a screen test, which got Niven nowhere. Another screen test of sorts—an appearance at Paramount before an imperially silent Mae West—was also in vain. (Nearly 40 years later, however, Miss West recanted and told a reporter that "Niven has charm where other men only have cologne.")

Third Man Out

Yet another screen test ended in failure when newcomers Fred MacMurray and Ray Milland both got contracts with Paramount after appearing opposite Claudette Colbert. But Niven, the third man tried out that day, got nothing.

There were occasional jobs as a \$2.50-a-day extra—the first one was as a spray-painted "Mexican" in a low-budget cowboy flick—but for a while it looked as if Niven wasn't going to make it, despite his charm and growing circle of friends.

Nothing seemed to work. Not even luck.

One day Niven found himself playing polo against a team headed by powerful studio boss Zanuck. Niven,

who was, of course, hopeful of impressing the film magnate, was instead chagrined when his borrowed mount bit Zanuck on the buttocks.

And then the immigration authorities intervened, pointing out that Niven's visitor's permit had long since expired. Niven was forced to take off for the Mexican border, hiring out as a gun bearer for rich U.S. tourists hunting in the hills around the then small, dusty border town of Mexicali.

At last, Niven got lucky when the legendary Samuel Goldwyn viewed his initial screen test, liked what he saw, and signed Niven to a 7-year contract, starting at \$100 a week.

"I won't put you in a Goldwyn picture until you've learned your job," Goldwyn told Niven. "Now you have a base. Go out and tell the studios you're under contract to Goldwyn, do anything they offer you, get experience, work hard, and in a year or so, if you're any good, I'll give you a role."

Fluffed His Only Line

Niven did just that—but in his own inimitable style. Goldwyn sent him to Gilmore Brown's workshop at the Pasadena Playhouse, then Los Angeles' premier showcase theater. Niven was given a one-line part in a play and, with a celebrity audience on hand for his opening night, managed to drink a bit too much backstage in an effort to calm his nerves. He made a shambles of what little he had to do. Brown banished him from the theater, but Niven's career prospered anyway.

Most of the parts were small at first. In Howard Hawks' production of "The Barbary Coast" (1935), Niven played a Cockney sailor who was tossed out of a San Francisco brothel into a muddy street. He was signed the next year to play a bit part in the Jeanette MacDonald-Nelson Eddy opus "Rose Marie," but after filming his brief scene he left the studio, only to find out months later that his part had been re-shot with another actor.

The roles quickly got more meaty. Niven played an officer and friend of Flynn in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1936), Maj. Clyde Locket in "Dodsworth" (1936) and Fritz von Tartenheim in "The Prisoner of Zenda" (1937). In 1938, Niven appeared in the classic "The Dawn Patrol" and the following year gained co-star status for the first time in "Bachelor Mother" with Ginger Rogers. Later in 1939, he played opposite Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon as the devoted but unloved Edgar Linton, Miss Oberon's husband in "Wuthering Heights."

Despite the early frustrations, only four years after arriving in Hollywood, the one-time British officer had become a genuine star, critically well received and an actor of increasing capability. Life outside the studios also was happy. Niven dated Hollywood's most beautiful women, shared a beach house (called "Cirrhosis by the Sea") and caroused with Flynn, and was a friend of the industry's most talented stars and directors—people like Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Fred Astaire, Ronald Colman and William Wyler. And he was a frequent guest of William Randolph Hearst at San Simeon.

But then World War II intervened.

Though he had long ago resigned his commission and probably would not have been drafted into service, Niven left Los Angeles soon after Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, and after several false starts managed to return to England and gain a commission in an infantry regiment. He was assigned to a training battalion and, he claimed much later, out of infinite boredom volunteered for the newly formed commando units.

Niven, never at a loss for friends throughout his life,

made a new one in Churchill, who occasionally invited him to his estate on weekends. On first meeting him, Churchill growled, "Young man, you did a very fine thing to give up a most promising career to fight for your country."

But then, according to Niven's account, the soon-to-be prime minister added, "Mark you, had you not done so, it would have been despicable."

Niven saw action in Europe after the Normandy invasion and married an English girl, Primula Rollo, who was to bear him two sons. Niven rose from the rank of captain to lieutenant colonel during the war, and took time off to do a film overseas—"The Way Ahead" (1944), a glorification of the British infantryman.

The film, a government-backed propaganda effort, was directed by Carol Reed and written by Eric Ambler and Peter Ustinov. Ustinov, then a private in the army, doubled as Niven's orderly when they moved into London's Ritz Hotel to work on the movie.

Niven did another film in England—"Stairway to the Stars" (1946)—and then returned to Hollywood, "thinking I was God's gift to the movies," he told an interviewer 20 years later. "I went to Sam Goldwyn, said I was being underpaid, and asked how soon I could get out of my contract. The minute you reach the street," he told me."

It was a difficult time for Niven. His wife died in an accident at the age of 25 and his Broadway debut in 1951 as Gloria Swanson's lover in the unsuccessful "Nina" was a failure.

"I took a good look at myself," he said later, "still wandering vaguely about with a cup of tea in one hand and a duchess in the other. I was fast approaching that nervous no-man's land where actors feel down the backs of their necks the hot, sticky breath of leading men in their early 20s, while in front they see a solid phalanx of well-established character actors blocking

Please see NIVEN, Page 27

NIVEN: The Gentleman Personified

Continued from 26th Page

their path. That is no place to hang around very long with a cup of fast-cooling tea and an aging duchess."

Later in the 1950s, life picked up for Niven when he married a young Swedish model, Hjordis Tersmeden. They were to adopt two girls. And then—with Dick Powell and Charles Boyer—he started the hugely successful television firm, Four Star Productions.

There was no fourth star, by the way, because, according to Niven, most of Hollywood was frightened by the power of the film studio bosses. But the production company was an incredible success. "Four Star Playhouse" begat "Zane Grey Theater" which in turn spawned "The Rifleman," which spun off "Wanted Dead or Alive," starring an unknown named Steve McQueen.

It went on that way through the late 1950s and early 1960s—Four Star in one year had 14 TV series on the air, including two of Niven's own—"The David Niven Show" and "The Rogues." And Niven was suddenly one of the richest men in Hollywood. He decided to take his money and his family to Europe—permanently.

Niven explained the move in "The Moon's a Balloon." Taxes were eating him up, he said; the smog, the freeways and nasty gossip columnists were all bothering him. But, more fundamentally, "Hollywood had completely changed. The old camaraderie of pioneers in a one-generation business still controlled by the people who created it was gone . . . the scent of fear was

attacking the smog-filled lungs of the professional film makers, already resigned to the fact that their audience was brainwashed by television. . . . The pipe dream was gone—the lovely joke was over. . . . It was time to go."

Niven and his family moved to a chalet in Switzerland and, later, a villa overlooking the sea at Cap-Ferrat on the French Riviera, where he was to live a luxurious existence to his death.

It was an expensive life style—skiing the best slopes, tiger-hunting in India and entertaining his next-door neighbors, Princess Grace and Prince Ranier of Monaco—and Niven managed it by working a good deal of the time on films, both good and bad.

He turned down the role of Humbert Humbert in "Lolita" because he feared it would tarnish his gentlemanly image, but he had a long list of successes.

There was "The Bishop's Wife" (1947), "The Moon Is Blue" (1953), "Around the World in 80 Days" (1956), "Bonjour Tristesse" (1958), "Separate Tables" (1958), "Please Don't Eat the Daisies" (1960), "The Guns of Navarone" (1961) and "The Pink Panther" (1964), to name some of the better ones.

Niven liked to say his career was composed of playing officers, dukes and crooks, but he won an Academy Award as best actor in one of them, "Separate Tables," in which he portrayed a retired British officer.

"I always thank Deborah Kerr and Wendy Hiller," he told an interviewer in 1978. "They won the Oscar for me. They had to cry in the picture, which they did so beautifully that when I spoke, the camera panned to them sobbing . . . and I got the award."

He liked to refer to himself as "a displaced Cary Grant," and he was like that almost to the end—witty, classy, charming.

Like the time a few years ago when an interviewer asked him this old stock question: What is your philosophy of life?

"Life to me, I guess, is a sort of super Grand National Steeplechase, with all sorts of hurdles to jump over and places to fall down," Niven replied. "The trick is not to worry about winning, but to get around the course as best you can without doing any damage to the other riders and certainly not to the other horses."

Or, in another interview, in 1978, when he acknowledged that the ranks of his friends were thinning rapidly:

"We have to face it," Niven said. "An awful lot of my age group has been called up already. So many chums have gone, Cooper, Gable, Bogart. To say nothing of men of my own vintage—Errol Flynn and Ty Power. But there's no way they're going to get me off. I just won't go. I'll kick and scream and make a terrible fuss."

Charles Champlin remembers David Niven as a man of self-effacing charm. Calendar, Page 1.